
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

by Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem's
Consumer Protection and Antitrust Division

October 29, 2003

INTERNATIONAL TELEPHONE NUMBER SCAMS

The "809 scam" has been around for a long time and is making its way through the use of e-mail in its attempts to part innocent victims from their money. What is the "809 scam?" The "809 scam" refers to an innocent recipient receiving a phone, faxed, e-mail or pager message that asks the recipient to telephone the sender of the message immediately using an 809 area code. The reasons that one is required to call back are varied and may include:

- Notification of winning a prize;
- A requirement to call to avoid litigation over an outstanding account (that is not the victim's account);
- A message to call to receive information about a relative who is ill, has died or has been arrested.

Once the victim calls the 809 area code number, the victim ends up contacting a person who tries to keep the victim on the line or the victim is met with a long recorded message or even a clever recording that responds to the caller's voice. The victim ends up with a hefty phone bill! That is because each country sets its own telephone rates and there is no limit to the per-minute charge. The companies urging the victim to call have an incentive to keep them on the line as long as possible because the company will receive a portion of the international long distance charge. The more often the victim calls, and the longer they stay on the line, the more the company profits.

It is not always easy to tell if you are calling an international telephone number. In most cases, you have to dial "011" to begin your call to a foreign country. But there are locations outside the United States and Canada, many of them in the Caribbean, where you simply dial the area code and number to reach your party. And there are scam artists who have taken advantage of this confusion by promoting calls to "809" numbers in the Dominican Republic.

In one "international call scam" a woman's 15-year-old son called a telephone number that was advertised as a toll-free number on television. However, at some point, the call became an international toll call and the bill for the call totaled \$4,300. The call was actually placed to Vanuatu, an island in the South Pacific.

These international "pay-per-call" numbers are similar in operation to "900" number services, with one important exception. The protections offered by the Federal Trade Commission's 900 Number Rule, which requires clear disclosures to the caller about

the costs of the call before those costs are incurred, do not apply. This means there will be no preamble stating the cost of the call, nor an opportunity to hang up without being charged.

Here are some precautions you can take to prevent being billed for unwanted international telephone calls:

- Be skeptical about area codes you do not recognize such as 809 (Dominican Republic), 758 (St. Lucia), 242 (Bahamas), 284 (British Virgin Islands), 787 (Puerto Rico), or 664 (Montserrat). Check your telephone directory or call the operator to determine if the area code is for a domestic or international location before calling.
- Be wary of ads for information or entertainment services that make such claims as “not a 900 number,” “no premiums apply,” or “LD rates apply.”
- Tell family members they need your permission to call domestic or international long distance services. Caution family members about placing calls to 10 digit telephone numbers.
- You may wish to have your local telephone company put an international call block on your telephone line if you do not normally make international calls. In addition, a 900 number call block may be placed on your telephone line. Each block would prevent that type of call from originating from your telephone line.

If you are trying to determine whether to return a call to an international number, you should know that:

- You will not hear a preamble stating the cost of the call. Nor will you be given an opportunity to hang up without being charged.
- Ads for international pay-per-call numbers rarely, if ever, reveal the precise amount that you will be billed.
- Your telephone service may be cut off if you do not pay the charges for the international calls.

Even though the 809 area codes and others listed above are legitimate numbers on the North American calling system, unless you are planning a vacation, have family or do business in a foreign location, be wary of returning calls to these areas.

The Attorney General’s Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

* * * * *